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SUBJECT: BAGHDAD ON HIS MIND: GOK'S PRE-OCCUPATION WITH IRAQ

Classified By: Richard H. Jones for Reason 1.5 D.

11. (C) SUMMARY: During a recent meeting with a visiting delegation led by former US senior diplomat Frank Wisner, Kuwait's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Al-Sabah shared candid views on pressing priorities for his government. Discussion centered on four main themes: Saddam Hussein's removal; visions for a new Iraq; America's interest and image in the region; and the role Arab states should assume at this time. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) On January 11, 2003, Dr. Mohammed met with Ambassador Wisner's four-member non-governmental delegation, which was in Kuwait to lead a seminar on economic reform organized by the Embassy and hosted by the Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (septel). Ambassador Wisner, a former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and of State for

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International Security Affairs, was joined by Henry Siegman, Director and Senior Fellow of the US/Middle East Project at the Council on Foreign Relations (which commissioned the study from which the seminar was based); Dr. Bernard Hoekman, Research Manager of the International Trade Group at the World Bank (who co-wrote the study); and Fouad Makzoumi, a Lebanese businessman and Chairman of the Future Pipe Group (who sponsored the study). Also attending the meeting with Dr. Mohammed were Ambassador Jones and Econoff (notetaker).

13. (C) SADDAM MUST GO: Asked how the United States should understand Kuwaiti needs, Dr. Mohammed was blunt and explicit in his response. In the short term, he said, Saddam must exit the scene. In his view, the Iraqi leader was a pariah who had committed sacrileges that placed him beyond redemption or rehabilitation. Dr. Mohammed said consensus among Gulf leaders was that Saddam is a compulsive liar who cannot be trusted and a dangerous man who has brought great instability to the region.

14. (C) Dr. Mohammed was doubtful regarding the possibility of resolving the present standoff without military conflict. He acknowledged that providing Saddam exile had become a hot topic of discussion throughout the Arab world, with much press speculation that both Arab and non-Arab envoys were visiting Baghdad to offer him safe passage. Dr. Mohammed predicted that these invitations would increase in the coming weeks but that the Iraqi leader would ultimately spurn them all. "Saddam invented the concept of the human shield," the Kuwaiti minister said, "so I would be surprised to see him exit before many Iraqis are sacrificed."

15. (C) Dr. Mohammed did not expect many negative reactions toward the United States should it use military force against Iraq. On the contrary, he said, expectations in the region were that the "nightmare" would soon be over. The mood in Kuwait was upbeat, he added, noting that the stock market was "going through the roof" in anticipation that Iraq soon would be opening again for business.

16. (C) BUILDING A NEW IRAQ: Ambassador Wisner told Dr. Mohammed that in his view there would be violent confrontation in Iraq, followed by a period of chaos and uncertainty. Even if Saddam were to leave peacefully, he said, the United States would still require certain criteria be met in the formation of a new Iraq. These conditions included that Iraq become peaceful and friendly with its neighbors and that weapons of mass destruction be accounted for and destroyed. Dr. Mohammed agreed that Saddam's removal was necessary but not sufficient. He said that in the long term there needed to be a more stable, democratic Iraq, and the question now was how to achieve this outcome.

17. (C) The Kuwaiti minister observed that Iraq was in essence a failed state, which had become partitioned and was not likely to be reconstructed in its present configuration. He added that another "strongman" leader, such as Saddam, was not apt to succeed, and what the country needed now was a completely different direction. Ambassador Wisner agreed, stating that a new Iraq should be reconstructed as a confederation, with a center shared between the major ethnic and religious groups. He outlined three stages for development: 1) "early," in which order is re-established; 2)

"transitional," in which key Iraqis are consulted and advised; and 3) "permanent," in which Iraq begins attending again to its own affairs.

18. (C) Dr. Mohammed asked what role in this reconstruction process the USG sees for the Iraqi opposition groups. Ambassador Wisner replied emphatically that there is no government in exile waiting to rule Iraq and that no external entity, such as the Iraqi National Congress, would exclusively run the country. He said that post-Saddam Iraq will require a combination of outside actors and individuals presently inside the country, including figures from the military once it has been cleansed of its subversive Baathist elements. Ambassador Jones added that the USG has resisted the opportunity to name a government-in-exile, as the INC had hoped, believing it would become the de-facto government in a new Iraq.

19. (C) EYE ON AMERICA: Dr. Mohammed said one critical concern within the Arab world, including the Gulf states, is that America will overreach in its strategy toward Iraq. He said many people in the region are drawing parallels between the United States now and the old European imperialist powers. They fear that America sees its role as carrying a "White Man's Burden," marching into the region "to civilize the savages and teach the lesser breeds the virtues of self-rule." Many see in the USG's policy toward Iraq an intention of molding the region in America's own image. More conservative elements are characterizing this development as a clash with Islam, and the Western press is only serving to fuel the debate.

110. (C) Ambassador Wisner assured Dr. Mohammed that the USG is not on an imperialistic crusade but rather on a mission to bring lasting peace and stability to Iraq and the region. He added that there is wide debate in the United States over the shape of a new Iraq, which is being driven by the practicalities of bringing about this change. When Dr. Mohammed suggested that the next step in this process must include a review of US-Iran relations, Ambassador Wisner agreed that this was both advisable and necessary. He added that the US is working on finding the best way to talk to the Iranians, which is never an easy task. (NOTE: Dr. Mohammed was proud to convey that Kuwait's Foreign Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad was that day visiting Iran, after Iraq's Foreign Minister had been refused in Tehran. Local press reported January 14 that Kuwait and Iran issued a joint communique on their intention to strengthen ties in several areas, including security, defense, and economic cooperation (septel). END NOTE.)

111. (C) ARAB OPPORTUNITIES: Ambassador Wisner stressed that now more than ever it is vital for Washington and the West to hear from Kuwait and other Arab states about their vision for a new Iraq. He said now is the moment of opportunity for Arab leaders to be heard, and it is important for President Bush to receive candid views from friends of the United States, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states. Dr. Mohammed took a long time to reflect after Ambassador Wisner commented that "he who is on the side of the US now is a friend; he who is against the US will be long remembered; and he who is on the side of the US with clear advice to offer will be respected."

112. (C) In response to Dr. Mohammed's comment that there can be no lasting stability in the region without resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Henry Siegman said that if this was the consensus among Arab leaders then Washington was not hearing this message with the kind of conviction and urgency it merits. He added that Arab leaders now have a prime opportunity to bring their concerns to the attention of President Bush. Ambassador Wisner said it was not his impression that there was deep dialogue between US and Arab leaders on these issues. He added that it would be unwise for Arab leaders to sit on their hands while a new Iraq was being constructed around them.

JONES